# Restoring Duty and Honor to the Officer Corps

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THE OFFICER CORPS NEEDS a reformed leadership ethos to accompany the Army's transformation process. The principles of duty and honor must be part of this reform if the Army is to succeed institutionally during this transition. These moral principles, the need for which is not new, either have been ignored or neglected in the contemporary leadership ethos. Most would agree these principles are bedrock for an officer corps before, during, and after a transformation process. However, at the dawn of current transformation, the modern officer corps has habitually sought refuge in gray areas and situational ethics to overcome personal failure or to achieve personal success at the expense of institutional principle. For the sake of discussion, the term "safety of the gray" will be used to describe this phenomenon.

This article does not review or examine the merits of current trends in organizational leadership systems or leadership techniques that impact transformation. There is enough literature and instruction in the Army to adequately inculcate officers with the requisite knowledge and tools for the proverbial kit bag. Instead, the article addresses duty and honor as absolutes, neither of which should be carried out selectively nor employed situationally—principles of leadership that reject the safety of the gray.

Many dismiss duty and honor as being outdated, outmoded, or without utility. General (GEN) Douglas MacArthur thought otherwise when he delivered his farewell address to the cadets at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, in 1962. He believed the principles of duty, honor, and country were absolutes: "'Duty,' 'Honor,' 'Country'—those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be. They are your rallying point to build courage when courage seems to fail, to regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith, to create hope when hope becomes forlorn. . . . The unbelievers will say they are but words, but a slogan, but a flamboyant phrase. Every pedant, every demagogue, every cynic, every hypocrite, every troublemaker, and I am sorry to say, some others of an entirely different character, will try to downgrade them even to the extent of mockery or ridicule. . . . But these are some of the things they build. They build your basic character. They mold you for future roles as the custodians of the nation's defense. They make you strong enough to know when you are weak, and brave enough to face yourself when you are afraid."[1]

> Among the outgrowths of this relativistic philosophy was the concept of self-esteem and, possibly, egoism. . . . [It] took root in American society in the 1960s and eventually entered the American business community's management philosophy. The thought was that if individual desires were met first, individuals would better contribute to group or organizational goals. Thus, an entrepreneurial ethos replaced a corporatist one. Not long thereafter, the concept also took root in military leadership practices.

The last decade of the last century proved tumultuous for the officer corps. Post-Cold War changes in the way the Army fought, different from previous postwar periods, presented a cumbersome leadership challenge. These changes, characterized by frequent deployments to conduct military operations other than war and stability and support operations, tested the Army's conventional leadership practices. More often absent than not were the moral foundations embodied in the principles of duty and honor that have historically sustained leaders faced with uncertainty.

These practices, which undergirded a mechanized force that would fight a quantifiable opponent on a sanitized battlefield, proved unworkable. Relying on utilitarian and structural approaches—a quantified battle drill and checklist mind-set—was insufficient to deal with the esoteric leadership challenges in the new environment. This leadership approach not only failed the Army in the field but also failed the Army in garrison. Having to adapt home station routines to support new and ill-defined battlefield roles added new stresses for leaders.

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Leaders often emphasize training on measurable or procedural tasks such as preparing to fire an artillery piece.

The [War College] study found that "the ideal standards of ethical/moral/professional behavior . . . are accepted by the officer corps as proper, meaningful, and relevant for the Army of today." On the other hand . . . "the Army rewards system focuses on the accomplishment of short term, measurable, and often trivial tasks, and neglects the development of those ethical standards which are essential to a healthy profession." This contradiction could be explained away by and give credence to the fact that truth and standards are relative. . . . In essence, no harm is done if one is getting the job done.

Pressures to fulfill garrison maintenance and training requirements that a Cold War army still demanded presented the temptation to employ expedience over principle. Exaggerating unit status reports was but one example of this kind of expedience. Complicating this environment were social tumults. Senior military officers proved unfaithful to their wives, and company and field grade officers flinched at abuses their noncommissioned officers inflicted on basic trainees. Moral compartmentalization, self-preservation, and erosion of trust replaced what was once considered keystone traits of all officers—duty and honor. These principles became casualties to the tumults of the 1990s Army.

## Values versus Principles

Principles are timeless. In the past when the Army transformed because of doctrinal evolutions or technological revolutions, moral leadership remained constant during the transformation. If current Army Transformation is to be successfully implemented, enduring leadership principles, not malleable subjective values, are imperative. Solving contemporary leadership challenges now and in the transformed Army demands an examination of what foundational principles—duty and honor versus subjective values—the officer corps should uncompromisingly adhere to.

Values are ideals and customs that arouse an emotional response, for or against them, in a given society or in a given person. Values tend to fluctuate with trends and conventional wisdom, whereas principles transcend time, feelings, and individual desires. Values can be easily changed because they are utility-based. Whatever is considered to be practical, workable, or expedient within a given community can be a value. In contrast, principles are permanent.

It can be argued that principles and values are the same, but another argument can be made that they are polarized. In the former, they are not antithetical to each other because one builds on the other. In the latter, principles and values would be considered to be incompatible. Principles are foundational, and values usually are derived from accepted norms whose underlying bases rely on contemporary wisdom or ideas of the day. Thus, in addressing leadership reform, a values approach most often relies on systemic or structural changes. Individual behaviors and their derivations more often are overlooked than considered.

The contemporary concept of values entered American society through the theosophical movement in the early 20th century. Its goal was universal brotherhood through establishing values within a society. However, Mohandas K. Gandhi, architect of the concept of values, states that values are based on relative truth. That is, there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth is an individual experiential perception instead of an unchanging, inherent universal standard. Thus, truth is an inward interpretation, and self, above all, takes primacy in determining truth.[2]

Principles involve fundamental truths as the basis for reasoning or action instead of what might be considered expedient or useful in a given situation. Hence, principle-based leadership does not accommodate expediency as does leadership based on entrepreneurial motivations. Unfortunately, the latter can serve as the pretext for situational ethics which, in truth, is a retreat into the safety of the gray.

## Entrepreneurial versus Principled Leadership

Among the outgrowths of this relativistic philosophy was the concept of self-esteem and, possibly,

egoism. Gandhi's concept of values took root in American society in the 1960s and eventually entered the American business community's management philosophy. The thought was that if individual desires were met first, individuals would better contribute to group or organizational goals. Thus, an entrepreneurial ethos replaced a corporatist one. Not long thereafter, the concept also took root in military leadership practices.

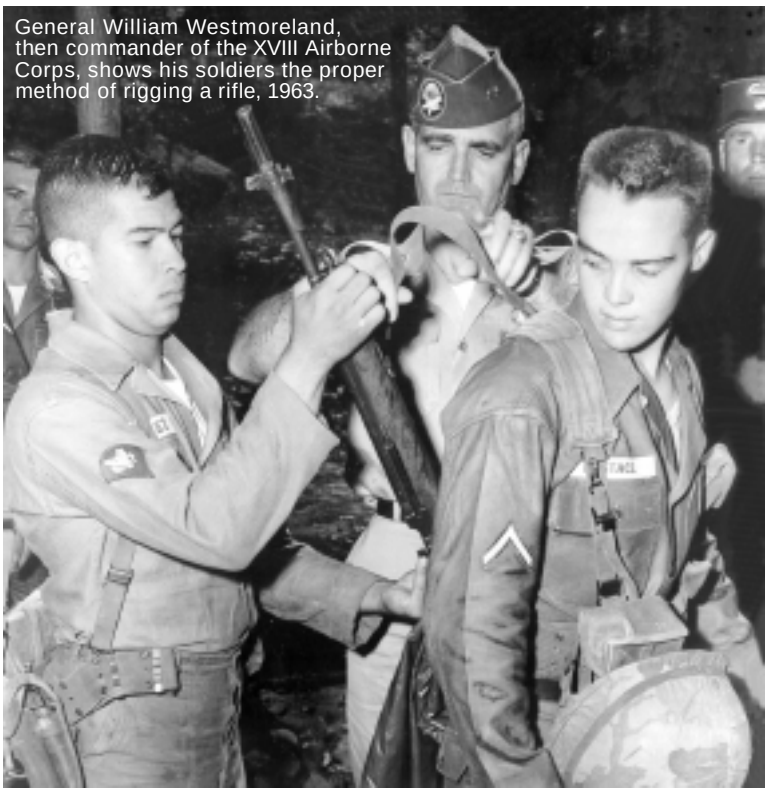
There are many factors that influence officers in their leadership actions. Unfortunately, entrepreneurial approaches seem to prevail as the primary motivation for what inspires most leaders' actions. Leaders' entrepreneurial motivations are self-serving. An unfortunate manifestation of such motivations is finding utility in the "perception as reality" approach to achieving standards. Rooted in relativism, entrepreneurial officers often rely on and/or accept appearance over substance.

An example of appearance over substance is the "PowerPoint Army." It often seems that more value is placed on a presentation's creativity than on its content. While this kind of ethos may be stimulating and may enhance one's image, it creates two problems. Appearance over substance encourages individualistic rather than principle-based ethics within officers. Also, appearance cannot hide lack of substance forever.

This leadership phenomenon within the officer corps is not new. It was prevalent during the Vietnam era and may have contributed to the Army's current leadership practices. In 1970, Army Chief of Staff GEN William Westmoreland commissioned the U.S. Army War College to study the state of the officer corps. An entrepreneurial ethos existed then just as it seems to now.

The War College study revealed a schizophrenia. The study found that "the ideal standards of ethical/moral/professional behavior as epitomized by 'Duty-Honor-Country' are accepted by the officer corps as proper, meaningful, and relevant for the Army of today."[3] On the other hand, the study revealed that "there are widespread and often significant differences between the ideal ethical/moral/professional standards of the Army and the prevailing standards. . . . [That is,] the Army rewards system focuses on the accomplishment of short term, measurable, and often trivial tasks, and neglects the development of those ethical standards which are essential to a healthy profession."[4] This contradiction could be explained away by and give credence to the fact that truth and standards are relative, and thus ethical gray areas indeed do exist. In essence, no harm is done if one is getting the job done.

The War College study also concluded that the disparity between ideal standards of principled behavior and manifested behavior was the result of "selfish, promotion-oriented behavior; inadequate communication between junior and senior; distorted or dishonest reporting of status, statistics, or officer efficiency; technical or managerial incompetence; disregard for principles but total respect for accomplishing even the most trivial mission with zero defects; disloyalty to subordinates; senior officers setting poor standards of ethical/professional behavior."[5] In addition to revealing schizophrenic entrepreneurial ethics, the study concluded that the Army was more focused on organizational structures and systems than it was on inculcating ethical principles within its officers.



General William Westmoreland, then commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps, shows his soldiers the proper method of rigging a rifle, 1963.

US Army

Choosing the harder right over the easier wrong also parries moral compartmentalization, another form of the safety of the gray. . . . [General] Westmoreland pointed out: "Competence and integrity are not inseparable. The officer who sacrifices his integrity sacrifices all; he will lose the respect and trust of those he seeks to lead, and he will degrade the reputation of his profession. The good repute of the officer corps is a responsibility shared by every officer. . . . Dedicated and selfless service to our country is our primary motivation. This makes our profession a way of life rather than just a job."

## Systems and Structures versus Principles

Another alternative that has replaced the principles of duty and honor are systemic and structural approaches to leadership. However, the history of warfare holds enough evidence that organizational structures and programs do not guarantee battlefield success; they are means rather than ends. The U.S. Army has a history of developing new systems or adjusting structures in lieu of changing behaviors when leadership fails. Currently, there is also an ethos whereby value is placed on leadership that uses systems, structures, and techniques. While quantifiable, thus providing credibility, this approach to leadership also finds safety in gray areas. It replaces personal accountability with seemingly tangible but benign approaches to overcoming or assuaging human weaknesses or personal failure.

Michel Foucault, a 20th-century French philosopher devoted to the history of societal systems, developed the idea of organizational cohesion by means of structures and systems in his work "Disciplines." On the surface, military leadership-organizational dynamics validate his philosophy. Foucault believed that cohesion—the feeling of belonging—could be created through systemic and structural techniques rather than through foundational leadership principles. He implied that programs stressing unity of effort and a common cause could develop organizational cohesion.[6] The U.S. Army's systems and structures also could claim success in building unit cohesion by similar means.

Despite history bearing out the effectiveness of building cohesion organizationally, Foucault says nothing of the intangible influence of those who lead organizations. What would happen to unit cohesion if subordinates witnessed lack of duty and honor in their leaders? A possible result would be dissension or disloyalty within the ranks, leading to unit disintegration. In combat, this could prove fatal.

In a principle-based ethos of duty and honor, a leader accepts responsibility for everything a unit does or fails to do, thereby accepting the consequences of the unit's failure regardless of the cause. On the other hand, building unit readiness on structural or programmatic means exempts a leader from personal or moral failure. Thus, solutions superficially reside in systemic or structural adjustments rather than alterations to personal failings, be they moral aberrations or errors in judgment.

## Loyalty versus Integrity

Loyalty and integrity are two principles that are universally accepted as being necessary for effective military leadership. However, in the face of a truth-as-relative ethos, officers often find that these principles conflict with entrepreneurial leadership. Is loyalty truly loyalty at the expense of integrity? The current prevailing ethos seems to morally justify sacrificing one over the other, especially in stressful or time-constrained situations. To maintain loyalty to organizations and to leaders, "bending the rules" seems both expedient and efficient.

This begs to question whether such a compromise is borne of self-preservation and convenience or borne of a skewed sense of honor. President Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, provides the result of such confusion: "Men may be inexact or even untruthful in ordinary matters and suffer as a consequence only the disesteem of their associates or even the inconvenience of unfavorable litigation. But the inexact or untruthful soldier trifles with the lives of his fellow men and the honor of his government."[7] It can be inferred that Newton spoke of the pitfalls one might experience in seeking moral sanctuary in the safety of the gray. Over time, it cannot stand on its own and will collapse at inopportune times, causing personnel to fail their leaders' and their subordinates' expectations. The ultimate results are failing the mission and suffering a blight on one's profession.

On the other hand, complaints among officers in the 1990s imply that external circumstances, rather than a lack of individual duty and honor, caused integrity compromises. However, moral principles, inculcated early and reinforced throughout an officer's career, will diminish such problems. Westmoreland believed as much when he cautioned against a lack of honor: "Inevitably, in the turmoil of the times, every officer will be confronted by situations which test his character. On these occasions he must stand on his principles, for these are the crucial episodes that determine the worth of a man. . . . While basic laws underlie command authority, the real foundation of successful leadership is the moral authority derived from professional competence and integrity."[8]

A correct sense of duty and honor constrains us to do what is right, no matter the intensity of uncomfortable situations. It ensures that personnel properly execute tasks and consistently meet standards. Army Chief of Staff General John A. Wickham, Jr. called this dilemma choosing the harder right over the easier wrong.

## Moral Decisiveness versus Moral Compartmentalization

Choosing the harder right over the easier wrong also parries moral compartmentalization, another form of the safety of the gray. Moral compartmentalization not only includes no harm done if the job is getting done, but it also involves selective obedi-

ence. The ultimate effect of selective obedience, while personally convenient, is eroding unit cohesion. For officers, selective disobedience could affect the reputation of their profession and could contribute to unit disintegration. Westmoreland pointed out: "Competence and integrity are not inseparable. The officer who sacrifices his integrity sacrifices all; he will lose the respect and trust of those he seeks to lead, and he will degrade the reputation of his profession. The good repute of the officer corps is a responsibility shared by every officer. Each one of us stands in the light of his brother, and each shares in the honor and burden of leadership. Dedicated and selfless service to our country is our primary motivation. This makes our profession a way of life rather than just a job."[9] Selective obedience, then, is juxtaposed to integrity, which is defined as moral excellence and honesty. With such a standard, even inane, inconvenient, and irrational orders must be followed without mental reservation or purpose of evasion.

The only kind of order the Army authorizes its personnel to disobey is an illegal one. Lieutenant William Calley ordering his men to fire on civilians in My Lai during the Vietnam war is one example of an illegal order that needs no further elaboration. A more contemporary example might be a battalion commander pressuring a staff officer to distort unit status reporting statistics. This is an illegal act that the staff officer can legally refuse to carry out, but he may feel compelled to comply with it for his own self-preservation.

Retired Lieutenant General Edward M. Flanagan, former commander of both the 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized) and the 6th U.S. Army, incisively addresses the subject of moral decisiveness and moral compartmentalization and whether he feels there is a gray area between them. He states: "Integrity is a constant; it is not a sometime thing. It is rigid, complete, and unwavering. It brooks no deviation from honorable conduct. It requires total honesty in all things at all times. . . . In no other profession is integrity more important than in the profession of arms because in no other profession are so many men's lives at stake. No other profession bears the weight of the security of the nation. No other profession calls upon men to make life and death decisions for other men. Therefore, in no other profession are integrity, probity, and honesty so important. If an officer or NCO [noncommissioned officer] does not have integrity as his bond, his foundation, his core, no matter what else he has, he's a failure. There is no place for him in the military establishment."[10] In short, Flanagan emphasizes that duty and honor are paramount, and as such, moral decisiveness is not optional.

In the 1990s, duty and honor suffered degradation as foundational principles to internalize and manifest as absolute in being considered a complete leader. Even if moral failings become commonplace throughout the officer corps, the inarguable necessity to practice principled leadership is not invalidated. The ultimate purpose for reforming the Army's officer leadership ethos lies not only in the inherent correctness of it but also in building combat-ready units to effectively perform on future battlefields. Large-scale mechanized warfare, while the most lethal type of conventional conflict, will be the least likely. Systemic and structural approaches to leadership are effective in this type of environment. It is an environment in which quantifiable and equipment-based solutions are possible.

In the 21st century, leaders will face far more ill-defined, esoteric situations than they can deal with merely through quantifiable means. Principled leadership will help them make correct decisions regardless of the situation. Life, especially war, is too unpredictable to rely on expedient, benign, and antiseptic leadership methods. Uncompromising duty and honor will serve the officer corps well in decisionmaking amid an ambiguous modern battlefield. A reformed ethos, the foundation of which is based on the timeless principles of duty and honor, will see the U.S. Army through its Transformation in the 21st century. MR

NOTES

1. General Douglas MacArthur's farewell speech to cadets at West Point, New York, 12 May 1962.
2. J.S. Sethi, Gandhi Today (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1979), 34-35.
3. Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, Crisis in Command (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 84-85.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Timothy Mitchell, "Limits of State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," American Political Science Review (March 1991), 84 and 92-93.
7. Lieutenant General Edward M. Flanagan, Before the Battle (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), 137.
8. Ibid., 111.
9. Ibid., 111-12.
10. Ibid., 112-13.

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